

Civil War Trail

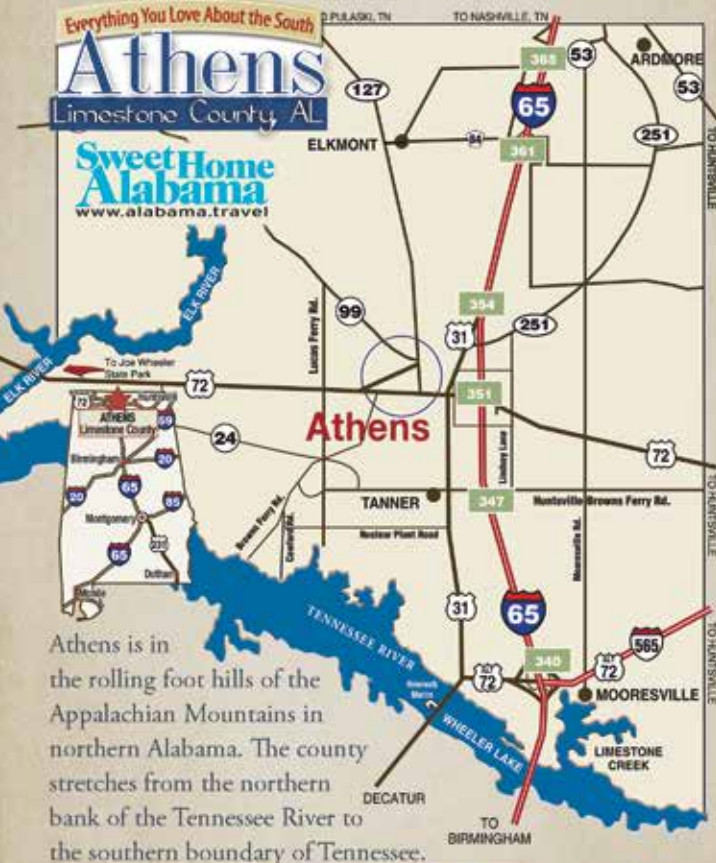
**ATHENS, ALABAMA
LIMESTONE COUNTY**

**A Self Guided Driving Tour featuring the
Battle of Athens & Battle of Sulphur Creek Trestle**

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Limestone County, AL

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Athens is in the rolling foot hills of the Appalachian Mountains in northern Alabama. The county stretches from the northern bank of the Tennessee River to the southern boundary of Tennessee.



**ATHENS-LIMESTONE COUNTY
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**ATHENS, ALABAMA
LIMESTONE COUNTY**

1860 ★ 1865

Civil War Trail

*Includes sites on the
National Register
of
Historic Places*



**Self Guided Driving Tour
featuring the Battle of Athens &
Battle of Sulphur Creek Trestle**

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A 1 Look for these icons to indicate stops along the Trail.

The War for Southern Independence, commonly called the Civil War, was very real and devastating to Athens and Limestone County from 1861 to 1865.

Limestone County had two railroads running through it and both would play a vital role in the war. The Decatur and Nashville Railroad ran North to South through the entire county. The Athens to Decatur portion is still operating today as it was in 1861.

Located in the southern part of the county, the Memphis & Charleston was the longest line in the Confederacy and is still operating today. This railroad linked the western Confederacy to the east and on its tracks moved supplies and soldiers. The strategic importance of these two railroads was the reason the war kept returning to Athens and Limestone County.

The Tennessee River forms a natural boundary in the southern part of the county dividing Limestone from Morgan County. The river played an important role in the war. It was patrolled by Federal forces to keep the Confederate Army from crossing the river into Limestone County.



Parapet of Fort Sumter, Charleston, S. C., with stacks of ammunition.

The War began on April 12, 1861 at Fort Sumter in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina. One of the earliest Confederate groups to muster in Limestone County was the "Mollie Guards". They formed the 35th Alabama Infantry Regiment on the grounds of Cambridge Methodist Church in March 1861. The Church continues to have Sunday services at this site. In June 1861, Captain Thomas H. Hobbs formed the 9th Alabama Infantry and they left Athens for Virginia. More units would form and leave as the war progressed.

According to Athens Mayor William P. Tanner, he thought Athens was a strong Union town.



Pvt. Edmund Ruffin, Confederate soldier who fired the first shot against Fort Sumter.

It is believed to be the last town in Alabama to take down the Stars and Stripes.

Things changed in North Alabama in April 1862 with the arrival of the Federal Army in Huntsville. By May they had invaded and captured all of Lauderdale, Limestone, Madison, Morgan and Jackson counties. All of these counties were north of the Tennessee River except Morgan, which had a very important railroad bridge crossing the river and was a vital rail center. The 18th Ohio arrived in Athens on Saturday, April 26, 1862 and encamped in and around the town.

On May 1st, Confederate Cavalry made up of the 1st and 2nd Louisiana Cavalry led by Colonel J.S. Scott drove



Cambridge Methodist Church where the 35th Alabama Infantry Regiment was formed in 1861.



1 The Civil War Trail begins at the Athens Depot which now houses the Limestone County Archives. In this painting, we see Captain Thomas Hobbs and his men of Company F, 9th Alabama Infantry leaving Athens on June 6, 1861 to go fight with Joseph E. Johnston and the Army of the Shenandoah. One hundred and sixty three Limestone County men were leaving for war. Many more Limestone County men had already left and many more were yet to leave. (Signed and numbered print available for purchase at the Athens Visitors Center.)

the 18th Ohio from Athens. They were pushed within 6 miles of Huntsville. The next day Colonel John B. Turchin, a former Russian Cossack came from Huntsville with the 19th and 24th Illinois Infantry and the 37th Indiana Infantry. Turchin's men ransacked Athens causing extensive damage.

2 After the sacking of Athens, the strong Unionist feelings began to diminish drastically among the citizenry. This action by the Federals influenced more Limestone County men and boys to join the Confederate Army. The "sacking" of Athens caused extensive damage financially and emotionally to the citizens of Athens. Union General James A. Garfield, future President of the United States, was in Mooresville (Point of Interest B) and Athens during the war. General Garfield stayed in the home of Dr. Maclin, just north of the courthouse, for several weeks during the court-martial of Colonel Turchin for his part in the sacking of Athens. Colonel Turchin was found guilty and convicted of charges brought forward in his court-martial. General Garfield presided over the trial in Athens and also after it was moved to Huntsville. The Federal Army remained in Limestone County for the duration of the war and until the end of Reconstruction in 1874.



John Basil Turchin (1822-1901) was a Union officer during the Civil War. In May 1862, he authorized his men to sack the city of Athens.



Portrait of Brig. Gen. James A. Garfield, officer of the Federal Army (Maj. Gen. from Sept. 19, 1863.)

3 Founders Hall on the grounds of the Athens Female Institute was saved from the Federal Army during the ransacking. It is said that Madame Childs had "written to President Lincoln" for protection for her school and her girls. President Lincoln sent Mrs. Childs a letter of protection.

The girls sang "Dixie" all night from the balcony of Founders Hall as the Federal guards stood watch. Founders Hall still stands today as part of the oldest



Mooresville Christian Church congregation invited General Garfield to preach at this church in 1863.



Painting of Founders Hall on the campus of Athens State University as it appeared in 1844 and at the time of the War for Southern Independence. It was the main building on the campus of the Athens Female Institute at the time of the sacking of Athens.

Institution of Higher Learning in the State of Alabama.

In 1863 a push was made by Federal forces to drive out any remaining Confederates in Limestone County. They were ordered to destroy the saltpeter works, gristmills and to take all horses and mules to prevent the farmers from raising crops.

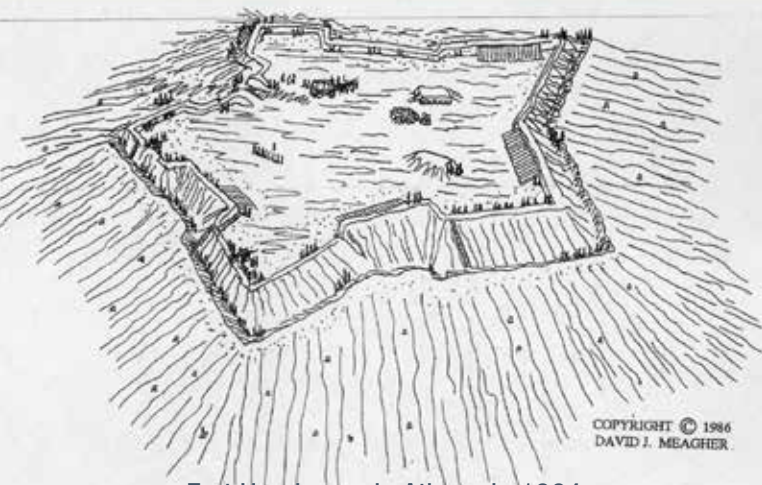
After this big push all over North Alabama, the Federal Army started searching for and recruiting black males to serve in one of the first black regiments in the fall of 1863. These regiments were designated as the 106th, 110th and 111th United States Colored Troops Infantry Regiments. The majority were freed or runaway slaves from North Alabama and South Central Tennessee.

The largest Federal Quartermaster Fort in the South was located in Nashville. The railroad loop from Nashville to Athens, Decatur and Huntsville brought supplies to the Federal troops and the return trip through Chattanooga back to Nashville returned damaged ordnance and wounded soldiers.



Gen. William T. Sherman in Atlanta in late 1864.

4 To protect the railroad Fort Henderson was constructed in Athens on "Coleman Hill" (located on Browns Ferry Street) and was completed in early 1863. The fort was described as "An earthwork 180 by 450 feet, bounded by abatis and palisade 4 feet high and a ditch 12 feet wide 8 feet from the bottom



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Fort Henderson in Athens in 1864

Hand drawing of Fort Henderson after construction in 1864 in Athens on "Coleman Hill" (located on current Browns Ferry Street). Courtesy of David J. Meagher. Used with permission.

of the ditch to the top of the parapets". This facility was, in the words of a Federal inspector of such defenses, "One of the best works of the kind I ever saw".

On March 23, 1864 General William T. Sherman passed through Athens by rail on an inspection tour of the defense of his supply lines. These lines were vital as he prepared for his infamous "March to the Sea".

Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest had made several requests to disrupt supply lines in North Alabama and Middle Tennessee. In 1864 General Richard Taylor issued a directive to Forrest "to worry Sherman's communications north of the Tennessee River".

Forrest was to disrupt supply lines and the railroad as much as possible to weaken Sherman's advance.

Forrest's force grew to about 4500 men as part of General Phillip D. Roddy's cavalry joined him at Masonville (Killen, AL) Forrest detached the 20th and 14th Tennessee Cavalry and ordered them to strike the Federal forces at McDonalds Station, (Tanner, AL) south of Athens. At dawn Forrest moved the remainder of his men across the Elk River and into Athens after sunset on September 23, 1864. Forrest surveyed the town and Fort Henderson. Some 600 men under the command of Colonel Wallace Campbell defended the fort. The men were from the 106th, 110th and the 111th United States Colored Troops. Under the cover of darkness another



Gen. Nathan
Bedford Forrest

500 men of the 3rd Tennessee (U.S.) moved into the fort. Other Federal soldiers were in blockhouses up and down the railroad guarding the trestles and bridges in and out of Limestone County.

On the morning of September 24th, 1864 at daybreak, Captain John Morton, Forrest's artillery officer opened fire with his eight guns, casting almost every shell inside the works according to the garrison commander. Forrest halted the shelling to send a white flag and a note demanding the surrender of the fort. The Federals declined, so Forrest repeated a maneuver that had worked for him before. He exposed the same troops and artillery repeatedly as he moved them down the line, which convinced the Federals they were facing a much larger force than they actually were. Colonel Campbell convinced his officers they needed to surrender rather than face such a large force of men.

5 This surrender allowed the Confederates to give their undivided attention to the 18th Michigan and 102nd Ohio Infantry relief force sent from Decatur into Limestone County. (Corner of Hwy. 72 and Jefferson St.) A brief skirmish resulted in another victory for Forrest and his men.

6 As a result, Forrest's men had captured 1,300 prisoners, 300 horses, 2 pieces of artillery and a large

The morning of Sept. 24, 1864, found the small North Alabama town of Athens completely surrounded by 4,500 Confederates under the command of Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest. Using his famous chicanery of troop movements, Forrest convinced the Union commander to surrender just before a relief force fought its way from Decatur. (Signed and numbered print available for purchase at the Athens Visitors Center.)

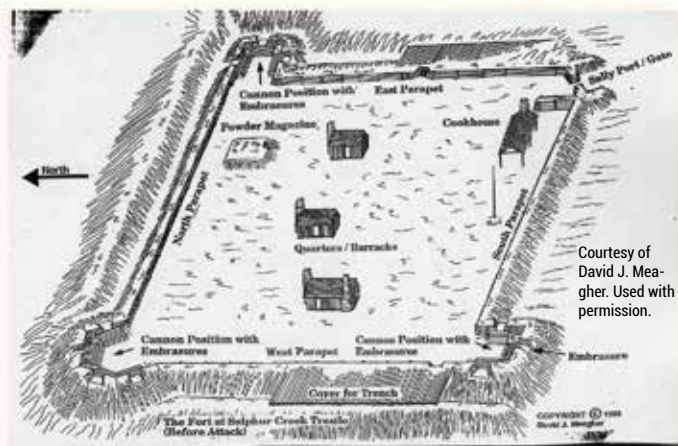




Sulphur Creek Trestle, 1864.

cache of supplies. Forrest turned his attention to the north and sent his men up the railroad, camping at Hays Mill, two miles south of Sulphur Creek and the railroad trestle and fort, which Forrest intended to capture the next day. That evening General Forrest stayed in Athens at the Maclin Home, the same home where General James A. Garfield stayed during the court-martial trial of Colonel James B. Turchin.

7 The next day, September 25th, Forrest fought, and won, the Battle of Sulphur Creek Trestle, the bloodiest

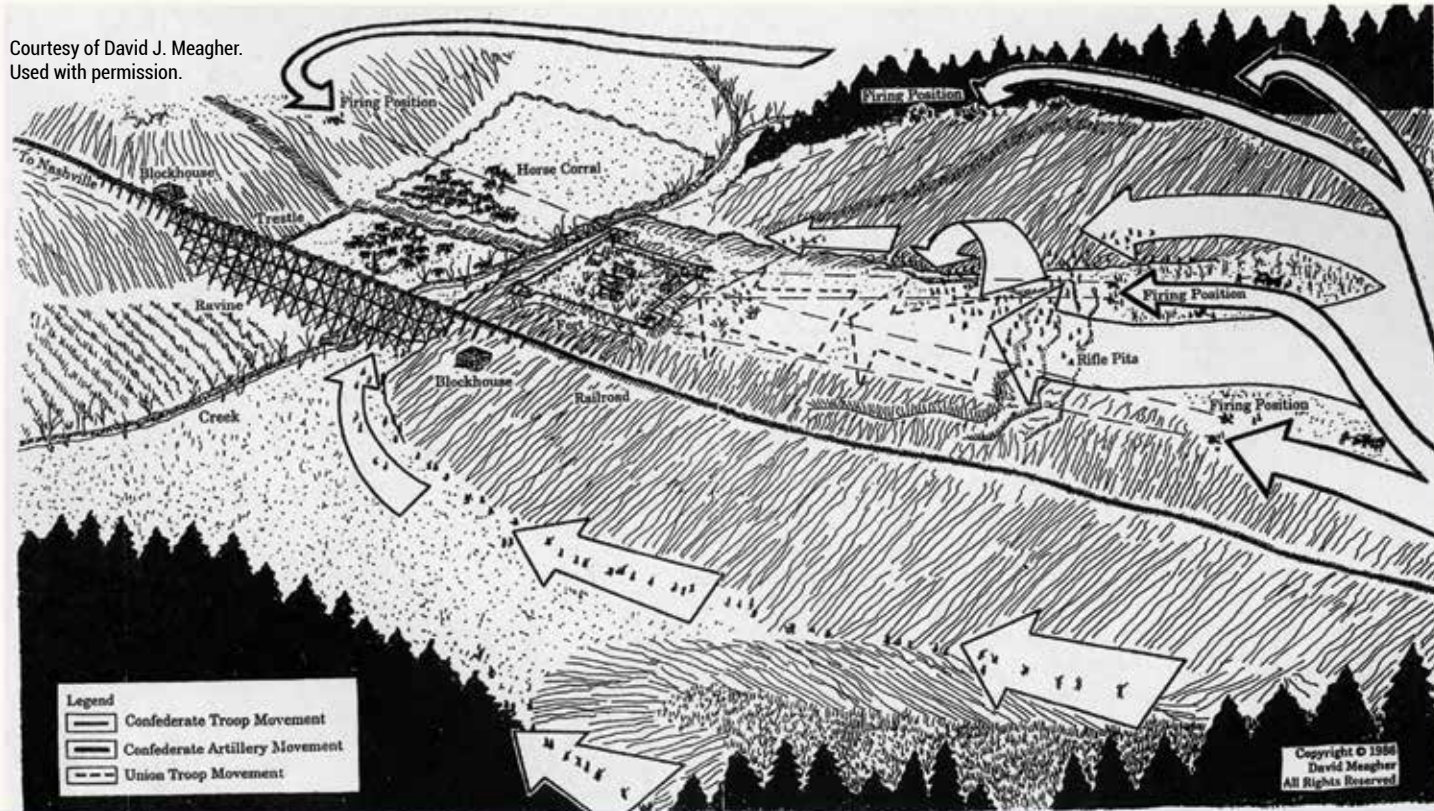


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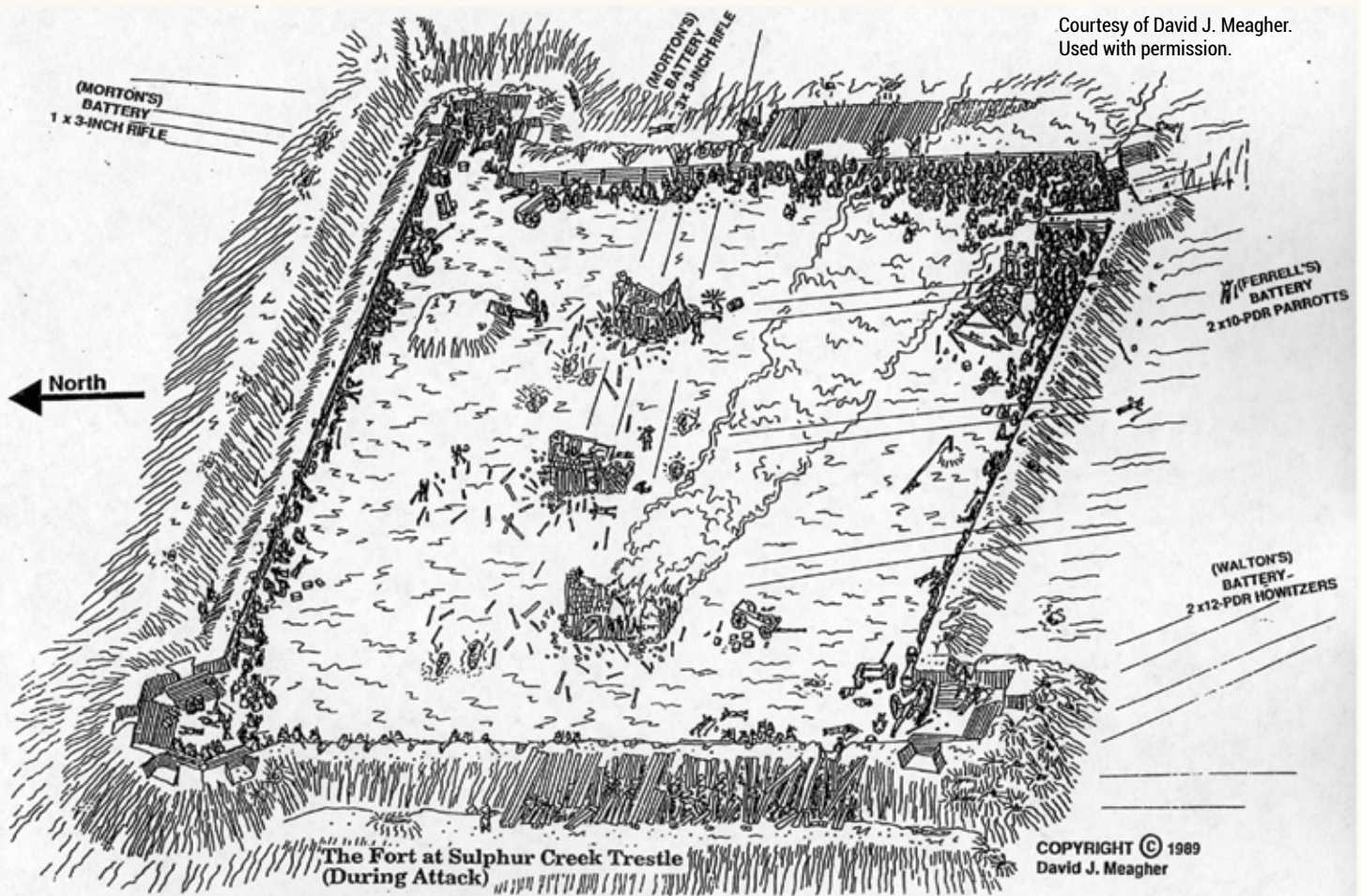
land battle fought in a single day in Alabama during the War Between the States. Some 30 Confederate soldiers and at least 200 Federal officers and men were killed. The captured soldiers were from units of the 110th U.S. Colored Troops Infantry Regiment, the 9th and 10th Indiana Cavalry, the 3rd Tennessee (U.S.) Cavalry and the 12th Tennessee (U.S.) Cavalry.

8 After the surrender of the fort at Sulfur Creek Trestle, Forrest continued up the railroad to a small town called Elkmont. About a half-mile north of Elkmont,

Courtesy of David J. Meagher. Used with permission.



Courtesy of David J. Meagher.
Used with permission.



The Fort At Sulphur Creek Trestle (during attack).

Forrest's men ran into a small group of Federal soldiers who fired some shots at the Confederates but quickly retreated back towards Pulaski, Tennessee.

9 Forrest and his men next came to a blockhouse guarding Holt's trestle (Mill Creek, located one-half mile south from the start of the Rails to Trails path); they captured the blockhouse and continued driving north. Arriving at the blockhouse guarding the Elk River Bridge they were able to capture it as well. At this point Forrest and his cavalry left Limestone County, Alabama and moved into Middle Tennessee where he continued with great success in disrupting the supply lines of Sherman's army.

During two days of battle, Forrest had captured almost 2,300 Federal soldiers. Many of these soldiers would perish in the sinking of the U.S.S. Sultana after the war ended, the greatest maritime disaster in United States history. The news of Forrest's victories reached Confederate President Jefferson Davis and General Robert E. Lee and the news also received the attention of the entire U.S. Army command. General

U.S. Grant telegraphed General William T. Sherman stating that driving General Forrest out of Middle Tennessee was to be the top priority before contemplating any other operations, including dealing with Hood's army.

The success of General Forrest's "Railroad War" was having the desired result- albeit too late to sway the eventual outcome of the war. The surrender of General Lee at Appomattox in April 1865 effectively brought the war to an end. The surrender of the remaining Confederate forces would come over the next few months.

As the Confederate soldiers walked home from all parts of the country into the Tennessee Valley and Limestone County, all they saw was devastation – chimneys standing where proud homes once stood, churches, courthouses, schools and mills burned completely to the ground. Entire towns had been destroyed. Livestock was scarce and there were no seeds for planting. It took many years for Athens / Limestone County and the rest of the South to recover from the war and "Reconstruction".

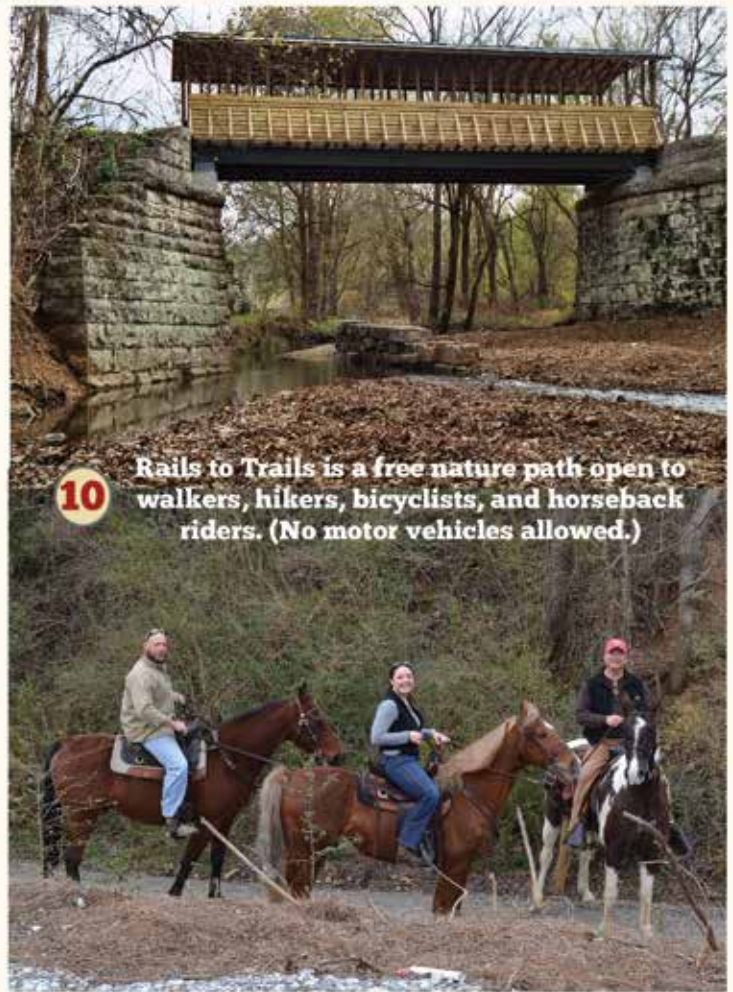
10 Today, just north of Athens, a 10.5-mile stretch of the old railroad bed has been converted into a walking, biking and horse back riding trail. The Richard Martin Trail, a part of the Rails to Trails Program, is a beautiful area for outdoor users. As you stroll the trail, remember those on both sides that gave the ultimate sacrifice when you see the historical marker for the Battle of Sulphur Creek Trestle.

11 As you arrive back in Athens you will drive to the Athens City Cemetery. Entering the cemetery parking area you will see a memorial marker to the Unknown Confederate Soldiers buried in Limestone County. Around it are the markers for eighteen Confederate soldiers who are buried in unmarked family plots in the cemetery. As you walk up the road into the cemetery you will come to the

C Confederate Circle. A monument to the Confederate soldiers buried in the circle stands in the middle.

In Limestone County there are almost 500 known Confederate graves (Point of Interest C.) including 180 in the Athens City Cemetery. The Captain Thomas H. Hobbs Camp of the Sons of Confederate Veterans has placed a marker on every known Confederate grave in Limestone County.

Those that enjoy the Athens / Limestone County Civil War Trail, a project of the Athens / Limestone County Tourism Association, will also enjoy the self guided Antebellum Trail and CD that will enhance your historical experience in Athens and Limestone County. It is also available at the Athens Visitors Center.



Tragedy on the Mississippi

The U.S.S. Sultana was built in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1863. The steamer's run was from Saint Louis to New Orleans. In the year 1865 on April 27, the U.S.S. Sultana left Memphis on the Mississippi river headed for the United States' worse river disaster. Days earlier on April 23, Captain Mason had brought the Sultana into Vicksburg with a boiler leak for repairs. There, Union soldiers released from Anderson prison in Georgia and Castle Morgan prison in Alabama had been released to return home as the war ended. General Dana, the Union Commander for the Department of the Mississippi, had ordered that the soon-to-be paroled prisoners at Camp Fisk be sent northward from Vicksburg on private steamers. The

Captain, who was part owner of the Sultana, was paid \$5 a head for enlisted men and \$10 for Officers, so he did not complain when the steamer was overloaded with passengers. On April 27th, the 260' sidewheel steamer sank near Memphis after a boiler exploded. It was certified to carry 376 passengers but was loaded with over 2000 sick, hungry, and war torn soldiers anxious to return home.



U.S.S. Sultana